



## A SOCIOCULTURAL APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING CLASSROOM INTERACTION IN TEACHING AND LEARNING CHINESE AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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# **A SOCIOCULTURAL APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING CLASSROOM INTERACTION IN TEACHING AND LEARNING CHINESE AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE**

IMPLICATIONS FOR CHINESE LANGUAGE EDUCATION

**BY  
RUI BAO**

DISSERTATION SUBMITTED 2015



**AALBORG UNIVERSITY**  
DENMARK



**A SOCIOCULTURAL APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING  
CLASSROOM INTERACTION IN TEACHING AND LEARNING  
CHINESE AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE: IMPLICATIONS FOR  
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## CV

Rui Bao has studied Chinese linguistics and literature for her Bachelor's degree in Anshan Normal University in China and has a Master's degree in tourism management and culture from Southwest University for Nationalities in China. From 2006-2010, she worked as an assistant professor and taught tourism-related subjects to undergraduate students at Mianyang Normal University in China. Since May, 2010, Rui has been working as a teacher of Chinese for beginner learners of all ages in Denmark. In 2012, Rui started her Ph.D. research by focusing on classroom teaching and learning of Chinese as a foreign language. Her primary research interests center on second/foreign language acquisition, pedagogy, classroom discourse, and curriculum and teaching resources development. In the last five years, she has published a number of chapters and a few articles in some well-known journals.



## ENGLISH SUMMARY

Second language researchers have long been interested in the classroom teaching process and in exploring how teaching can be made efficient and effective in order to promote L2 learning. Earlier research has focused on ‘the kind of input the learners receive and the kind of output they produce’ (Takahashi, 1999: 392). More recently, however, researchers have begun to realise the importance of examining the process between input and output and how it relates to L2 learning. This line of research is mainly informed by the sociocultural theory of mind (SCT), which originated from the works of Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978) and was later developed more thoroughly by contemporary researchers in the field of L2 learning (Lantolf, 2000; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). SCT emphasises the view that learning is a social activity mediated by language; that is, knowledge is first constructed by participants in interaction and is then internalised into an individual’s own possessions (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Under this view, learning entails learners’ participating in the meaning-making process by using the target language as a tool to shape and reshape their understandings of L2 knowledge. As such, interaction itself is more than a tool, rather becoming a source of learning. This view of interaction has provided a new perspective from which to understand the classroom process.

From this perspective, the classroom is a social context in which interaction relates to every oral exchange that occurs inside. Thus, any endeavour to improve classroom teaching and learning should start by looking at interaction. SCT-oriented research has identified a positive relationship between the learners’ interaction and L2 learning (Donato, 1994; de Guerrero & Villamil, 2000; Gánem-Gutiérrez, 2008; Swain & Lapkin, 1998; Swain, Brooks & Tocalli-Beller, 2002). However, most of the research has been focused on European language learners with a relatively advanced proficiency level. There are few sociocultural studies that have investigated the interaction between complete beginners of non-European languages, especially in classroom contexts. This is particularly true in the context of Chinese as a foreign language (CFL). Additionally, given the fact that interaction does not occur in a vacuum, tasks are commonly used by researchers as a stimulus to generate interaction. However, challenges are encountered when tasks are applied to a context wherein learners are accustomed to relying on a teacher’s instruction and are reluctant to take initiative in the learning process, indicating that task implementation must be tailored to the learners’ specific needs in order to realise its value for L2 learning (Burrows, 2008; Carless, 2003, 2007; Li, 1998; McDonough & Chaikitmongkol, 2007).

Against this background, this Ph.D. research, framed by sociocultural theory, seeks to explore how interaction relates to the teaching and learning of complete beginners in CFL by addressing the following research question:



*How do complete beginners of CFL interact with each other to deal with language-related problems during task-based activities and how can teaching make classroom interaction more facilitative for L2 Chinese learning?*

This research question is answered by the four sub-questions below:

1. How do complete beginners of CFL perceive the implementation of a task-based approach in CFL classes?
2. Whether and how do complete beginners of CFL construct opportunities for learning during task-based interaction?
3. In what ways does the teacher provide learners with opportunities for learning during teacher-fronted interaction?
4. What efforts can be made to inspire the kind of classroom interaction that is more likely to promote L2 learning?

To pursue the answers to these sub-questions, empirical data was collected from: 1) the two complete beginner CFL classes under the programme of China Area Studies in Aalborg University; 2) the two complete beginner CFL classes with a focus on adult learners who have an interest in learning the Chinese language in their spare time. Multiple methods were used for data collection, including semi-structured interviews, participant observation and video-recording.

The conclusions of this study are summarised into the following five points:

1. On the basis of learners' perceptions, this study suggests a weak form of the task-based approach for complete beginners of CFL, as these learners prefer a combination of task completion and teacher-fronted instruction rather than having a class dominated by either method alone. This indicates that a teaching method should be sensitive to a particular group of learners and the context in which the class takes place.
2. The interaction between complete beginners of CFL is conducive to learning, as it mediates learners in co-constructing the solutions to language-related problems that initially cannot be solved individually, the consequence of which leads to increasing L2 ability within the ZPD (zone of proximal development). However, the intervention from the teacher, such as feedback or additional exercises after tasks, is also necessary in order to consolidate the constructed knowledge from learner-learner interaction.
3. Within the sociocultural perspective, teaching is not a linear transmission of knowledge, but an exercise in assisting the learner. Therefore, the role of the

teacher is to draw on different strategies to provide as many opportunities as possible for learners to participate in dialogic interaction using the target language as a tool. However, the use of these strategies and their consequences for classroom interaction relate to individual learner differences, and even personal efforts or investment in the process of L2 learning. Thus, the method by which classroom interaction promotes L2 learning very much relies on the mutual efforts of both the teacher and the learners.

4. Self-reflective enquiry on the teacher's own practices is regarded as an effective tool in improving one's classroom process. Given the significant role interaction plays in the classroom process, the teacher should make classroom interaction a priority in his or her reflections, placing a special focus on language use, as language is the essential tool that the teacher uses throughout the interaction. This reflection helps to raise the teacher's awareness of his/her language use, meaning that learning is promoted via the creation of a more engaged and active interaction.

5. Classroom teaching is not simply a matter of a method, but also a process consisting of a series of interactional events between participants. To fully grasp it, we need both an external and internal perspective. The internal perspective enables us to gain a more complete understanding of what actually goes on in the classroom and how it relates to learning. Such understandings, in turn, inform the external perspective, equipping teachers with the knowledge of how to make their teaching effective and efficient, thus leading to the development of the teaching method.

Taken together, this Ph.D. research has contributed to our understandings of classroom teaching and learning in both theoretical and pedagogical aspects. Theoretically, it provides additional support of Vygotsky's view of the social nature of learning and extends the empirical base of sociocultural research on task-based learners' interaction to complete beginners of Chinese as a foreign language. Pedagogically, this study produces insights for L2 teachers in general and Chinese language teachers in particular, especially those who deal with learners with lower proficiency levels, in relation to the use of collaborative activities and methods by which one may effectively use language to make classroom interaction a rich environment for learning. It also has implications for Chinese instructional practices in terms of task implementation and task design. Finally, this study sheds some light on teacher education programmes and teacher professional development by prioritising language use, interaction and learning in their agenda.



# DANSK RESUME

Forskere i første og andet fremmedsprog har længe været interesserede i læreprocessen i klasseværelset og i at udforske, hvordan undervisning kan effektiviseres for at fremme indlæring af fremmedsprog (L2). Tidligere forskning har fokuseret på 'den form for input eleven modtager, og hvilket output han producerer' (Takahashi, 1999: 392). Nyere forskning er imidlertid begyndt at indse vigtigheden af at undersøge processen mellem input og output, og hvad den betyder for L2 læring. Denne forskning er hovedsagelig inspireret af den sociokulturelle teori om bevidstheden (SCT), som stammer fra den russiske psykolog Lev Vygotskys værker (1978) og senere blev udviklet yderligere af samtidige forskere indenfor L2 læring (Lantolf, 2000; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). SCT fremhæver det synspunkt, at læring er en social aktivitet, formidlet gennem sprog; d.v.s. først opbygges kundskaber hos deltagerne i interaktion, og derefter bliver de internaliseret som individets ejendom (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Set fra denne synsvinkel indebærer læring elevens deltagelse i en meningsfuld proces, idet han benytter målsproget som et redskab til at forme og omforme sin forståelse af L2 kundskaber. Interaktion er således mere end et redskab - snarere en kilde til læring. Dette syn på interaktion har skabt et nyt perspektiv i forståelsen af processen i klasseværelset.

Set i dette perspektiv er klasseværelset et socialt samspil, hvori interaktionen relaterer til hver eneste mundtlige ytring, som forekommer dér. Derfor bør ethvert forsøg på at forbedre undervisning og læring i klasseværelset begynde med, at man ser på interaktionen. SCT-baseret forskning har identificeret en positiv relation mellem elevernes interaktion og L2 læring (Donato, 1994; de Guerrero & Villamil, 2000; Gánem-Gutiérrez, 2008; Swain & Lapkin, 1998; Swain, Brooks & Tocalli-Beller, 2002). Det meste af forskningen er imidlertid baseret på europæiske elever på et relativt højt niveau. Der er kun få sociokulturelle undersøgelser, som har udforsket interaktionen mellem nybegyndere i ikke-europæiske sprog, særligt i klasseværelset. Dette gælder især for kinesisk som fremmedsprog (CFL). Desuden, da interaktion ikke finder sted i et vakuum, bliver opgaver (tasks) normalt brugt af forskere for at stimulere interaktion. Man møder imidlertid udfordringer, når opgaverne gives i en sammenhæng, hvor eleverne er vant til at støtte sig til lærerens undervisning og er tilbageholdende med at tage initiativ i læreprocessen. Dette indikerer, at brug af opgaver skal skræddersys til elevernes særlige behov, for at de kan indse deres værdi for L2 læring (Burrows, 2008; Carless, 2003, 2007; Li, 1998; McDonough & Chaikitmongkol, 2007).

På denne baggrund forsøger denne Ph. D. undersøgelse, inden for rammerne af sociokulturel teori, at udforske, hvordan interaktion relaterer til undervisning og læring hos nybegyndere i CFL, idet den stiller følgende spørgsmål:

*Hvordan interagerer nybegyndere i CFL med hinanden, når de skal løse sprogproblemer i løbet af opgave-baserede aktiviteter, og hvordan kan undervisningen lette interaktionen i L2 kinesisk læring?*

Dette spørgsmål uddybes af de fire under-spørgsmål herunder:

1. Hvordan opfatter nybegyndere i CFL anvendelsen af opgave-baseret undervisning i CFL?
2. Skaber nybegyndere i CFL muligheder for læring i en opgavebaseret interaktion, og i givet fald hvordan?
3. Hvordan giver læreren eleverne muligheder for at lære interaktion, styret af læreren?
4. Hvordan kan læreren inspirere til den form for interaktion i klasseværelset, som kan fremme L2 læring?

For at besvare disse underspørgsmål har jeg samlet empiriske data fra: 1) To CFL nybegynder-klasser i programmet kinesiske studier på Aalborg Universitet; 2) To CFL nybegynder-klasser med fokus på voksne elever, som var interesserede i at lære kinesisk i deres fritid. Der blev anvendt forskellige metoder til dataindsamling, bl.a. uformelle interviews, observation af deltagerne og video-optagelser.

Konklusionen af denne undersøgelse kan sammenfattes i følgende fem punkter:

1. På baggrund af elevernes tilkendegivelser må dette studie anbefale en forsigtig form for opgave-baseret undervisning til nybegyndere i CFL, da disse elever foretrækker en kombination af opgaveløsning og lærerstyret undervisning frem for en undervisning domineret af kun en af metoderne. Dette indikerer, at undervisningsmetoden skal afgøres af den konkrete sammensætning af elevgruppen og den sammenhæng, hvori undervisningen forgår.
2. Interaktion mellem nybegyndere i CFL fremmer indlæringen, da den hjælper elever til sammen at finde løsninger på sprogproblemer, som fra begyndelsen ikke kan løses individuelt. Konsekvensen af dette er en voksende L2 færdighed inden for ZPD (the Zone of Proximal Development). Men lærerens indgriben i form af, f.eks. feedback eller yderligere øvelser efter opgaverne er imidlertid også nødvendig for at konsolidere den viden, der er opnået i elev-elev interaktion.
3. Set i det sociokulturelle perspektiv er undervisning ikke en direkte overførsel af viden, men en øvelse i at hjælpe eleven. Derfor er lærerens rolle at øge elevens muligheder for at deltage i en dialogisk interaktion, idet han /hun bruger målsproget som et værktøj. Men brugen af disse strategier og følgerne heraf for interaktion i

klasseværelset er afhængig af de individuelle forskelle på eleverne og desuden af elevens personlige indsats og engagement i L2 læreprocessen. Hvilken form for interaktion i klasseværelset, der bedst fremmer L2 læring, afhænger i høj grad af lærerens og elevernes fælles anstrengelser.

4. Selv-reflekterende undersøgelse af egen praksis betragtes som et effektivt redskab til at forbedre lærerens arbejde i klasseværelset. Læreren bør, i lyset af den betydelige rolle, interaktion spiller i læreprocessen, gøre interaktion i klasseværelset til et hovedpunkt i sine overvejelser og lægge særlig vægt på at bruge sproget, da sprog er det vigtigste redskab, som læreren bruger under hele interaktionen. Denne refleksion er med til at øge lærerens opmærksomhed på hans/hendes brug af sproget, idet læring fremmes via en mere engageret og aktiv interaktion. Dette forbedrer altså undervisningspraksis i klasseværelset såvel som lærerens professionelle udvikling.

5. Klasseundervisning er ikke bare et spørgsmål om metode, men også en proces, som består af en serie interaktionelle begivenheder mellem deltagerne. For at forstå det til bunds behøver vi både et eksternt og internt perspektiv. Det interne perspektiv gør os i stand til at opnå en mere komplet forståelse af, hvad der faktisk foregår i klasseværelset, og hvordan det påvirker læringen. Omvendt kaster denne indsigt lys over det eksterne perspektiv, idet den giver lærere viden om, hvordan de kan gøre deres undervisning effektiv, hvilket fører til udvikling af undervisningsmetoder.

Alt i alt har dette Ph. D. studie bidraget til forståelse af undervisning og læring i klasseværelset i både teoretisk og pædagogisk henseende. Teoretisk giver det yderligere støtte til Vygotskys syn på læringens sociale natur og udvider den empiriske base for sociokulturel forskning i opgave-baseret elev-interaktion hos nybegyndere i kinesisk som fremmedsprog. Pædagogisk giver dette studie L2 lærere i almindelighed og undervisere i kinesisk i særdeleshed, indsigt i brugen af fælles aktiviteter og metoder, hvor man effektivt kan bruge sprog til at gøre interaktion i klasseværelset til et frugtbart miljø for indlæring. Det gælder især de lærere, som har at gøre med elever på lavere faglige niveauer. Studiet har også betydning for praksis i undervisning i kinesisk, hvad angår anvendelsen af opgaver og opgave-design. Endelig belyser studiet læreruddannelsen og læreres professionelle udvikling, idet det prioriterer sprogbrug, interaktion og læring i deres dagsorden.



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# **CHAPTER 1. BACKDROP OF THIS PH.D. RESEARCH**

## **1.1. A TRANSITIONAL JOURNEY: FROM A CHINESE LANGUAGE TEACHER TO A RESEARCHER**

With the growing international position of China, the teaching and learning of Chinese has witnessed a rapid expansion around the world. This expansion is propelled by the establishment of the Confucius Institute (CI) programme that was initiated by the National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language, known both in China and abroad by its abbreviation, ‘Hanban’. The aim of CI is to popularise Chinese language and culture, strengthen interactional exchanges and cooperation, and enhance friendship and mutual understandings between China and other countries. Most CIs are collaboratively operated between a foreign university, Hanban and one Chinese University partner. They are normally set up at local universities with existing Chinese studies departments or programmes. To get the work of CI circulating, each year, Hanban recruits a large number of native-speaking Chinese teachers, ranging from middle school to university. These teachers are sent to different CIs to meet the increasing demand of Chinese teaching. I, as one of these teachers, was appointed to the CI at Aalborg University (hereafter AAU-CI), which has Beijing Normal University as its Chinese partner. My work tenure was two-year, from 2010 to 2012.

Bearing this honourable mission in mind, I arrived in Aalborg on 30, April, 2010. As soon as I settled in, I became involved in teaching three Chinese language courses and organising some cultural activities. These courses comprised mainly adult learners who were either interested in the Chinese language or did business with China. However, none had any prior experience in Chinese learning. With no knowledge in Danish education, unsurprisingly, I taught using the same method as I was educated back in my school time in China. This method is characterised by the teacher dominating the classroom by lecturing on linguistic knowledge and the learners acting as passive recipients, and is known as the teacher-lectured approach. Although questions need to be answered regarding the effectiveness of this method on learning outcomes, based on my own observation and chit-chats before and after class, this method seemed to work for my teaching, as learners actively engaged in taking notes, rehearsing and answering the questions I posed during class. It was this engagement that enhanced my confidence about the way that I had always taught, leading me to assume, naively, that this manner of teaching was effective.

In 2011, the local Danish secondary schools started to pay great attention to the trend of globalisation. Given the rising status of China in this trend, these schools

recognised the need to provide learners with some knowledge and understanding on China, its language and culture. To this effect, the schools began to set up Chinese language and culture courses as a pilot project in the hope of fostering students' interests in Chinese learning. These courses mainly targeted students from grade 7 to grade 9, who voluntarily registered. The classes were usually organised during students' after-school time, lasting 90 minutes once a week. The teaching contents included Chinese language and culture together, which were designed and delivered by native-speaking Chinese teachers from the AAU-CI. I was selected as one of the teachers and made responsible for two classes that were offered by two different schools.

In view of my teaching experiences with the three adult classes mentioned above, I applied this teaching to the two after-school classes with young beginners. Regrettably, this teaching method encountered a challenge in terms of engaging these young learners in the learning process. On the contrary, learners talked and played with each other, showing reluctance to put effort into their participation, although they still responded to direct questions they were asked. Moreover, learners did not take these CFL courses as seriously as other normal school subjects, displaying an irregular pattern of attendance. Some of them even dropped out shortly after starting. As a result, there were only a few learners left to follow through with the whole course, and worse, few of these expressed a desire to continue their study in the future. Facing these difficulties, I felt very frustrated, and I could not help asking myself if there was something wrong with my teaching. I wondered what the problems might be and how I could improve.

In order to pursue the answers to these questions, I discussed them with some Danish colleagues over lunch. Through these discussions, it occurred to me that the way I taught had to be changed since it seemed incompatible with the Danish education schema, which focuses on an interactive and communicative classroom environment by emphasising learners' cooperation and participation in the learning process. In line with this educational focus, the method of project or group work is commonly used in the classroom. This way of teaching was in sharp contrast to my highly-structured approach, which may have been one reason behind the setback that emerged in these secondary courses. In this sense, it was assumed that the teaching could be more effective and efficient when aligned with the style with which the Danish learners were familiar. It was this assumption that drove me to explore a teaching practice/method that had a good reputation as far as providing opportunities for learners' participation and cooperation in the classroom learning process.

Starting with something as simple as typing 'language teaching method' into Google search, I found many results. Among them, the term 'task-based language teaching' caught my eye, as it was quite new for me in comparison with other well-known methods such as grammar translation, the audio-lingual method and the

communicative approach. With instinct and curiosity prompting me to explore the things I did not know, I opened more links regarding some empirical research reports on the use of the task-based approach, the results of which indicated that this approach increases learners' participation, boosts learners' interests and motivation, provides learners with more opportunities to use L2 and creates an enjoyable learning environment. For me, it was my 'life-saving straw', as more teaching was to take place in the following semester. In order to gain a deeper understanding of this approach, I bought the book *Task-based Language Learning and Teaching* authored by Ellis (2003). In this book, I was impressed by the positive effects that task implementation has on classroom teaching and learning, and came to believe that this approach would make a significant difference in my teaching.

With this belief, I tentatively adopted a task-based approach for my next two secondary classes. In accordance with Ellis (2003), I designed the tasks used in these classes with a special emphasis on using learner cooperation for task performance. In order to understand its effectiveness, learners were required to fill in a form to reflect on their learning experiences immediately following the classes. However, the analysis of these reflections found that learners from the two classes expressed different attitudes concerning their learning experiences. In one class, most learners enjoyed task completion in their classroom time while learners from another class felt the opposite (Bao, 2012a, 2012b). The reason for this difference was unclear, but it is certain that the task-based approach is not a 'panacea'. In other words, classroom teaching is more than just performing a method. The contradictory findings from my two different classes indicate a need to understand learners' perceptions of their experiences in learning Chinese as a foreign language. Such an understanding will serve as the starting point for one to further explore how to make teaching effective and efficient in relation to L2 learning. It was this need that prompted my journey in this Ph.D. research.

## **1.2. THE TEACHING AND LEARNING OF CHINESE AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE: WHERE WE ARE**

Before discussing the status quo of teaching and learning Chinese as a foreign language (hereafter CFL), it is necessary to clarify what is meant by Chinese as a foreign language. Unlike learners who learn CFL in China, this study focused on learners who learn Chinese as either a school subject or as a side interest in their own countries. In recent years, this group of CFL learners has been on a rapid rise in many countries and regions. Undoubtedly, this rise has engendered unprecedented opportunities for the professional growth of CFL instructors, as they have traditionally been marginalised in the academic field (Linnell, 2001). Meanwhile, it has also created a variety of challenges in relation to the efficacy of CFL teaching and learning.



First, an adequate syllabus and systematic assessment in CFL teaching and learning targeted to the diversity of CFL learners is absent (Zhang & Li, 2010). Generally, university learners who majored in Chinese language had a fixed syllabus, designated curriculum and corresponding assessment. Apart from this group of learners, however, CFL learners vary considerably in many aspects, such as age, proficiency level, learning motivation, educational background, curriculum, assessment. There are presently no tailor-made curricula, assessment procedures or textbooks to meet the needs of these diverse learners. This remains one of the key bottlenecks for the sustainable development of CFL education, as the lack of systematic assessment may make learners feel less rewarded than they would be by learning other European languages in school, or possibly cause them to take CFL learning less seriously than other school subjects. This may give one account for the high attrition rate of CFL learners enrolled in different Chinese language programmes (Orton, 2008). Although the assessment scheme—the Chinese HSK (Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi or Chinese Proficiency Test)—was developed by Hanban, this test primarily targets the CFL learners who either had a major in Chinese language or who were involved in an intensive or comprehensive Chinese course in China. Given this, HSK might be irrelevant for CFL learners in the case of this Ph.D. research, as their learning environment differs considerably from that in China. Thus, for the sustainable development of CFL education, the availability of an appropriate syllabus and assessment for this group of CFL learners is still essential.

Second, the lack of an appropriate teaching method is a barrier for CFL teaching and learning. Although there are a variety of approaches regarding language teaching, they are based primarily on teaching English as the target language. However, given the many significant linguistic differences between Chinese and English, questions need to be answered regarding the applicability of these methods to teaching Chinese language. Indeed, the Chinese language, given its unique features in pronunciation and character, has provided extensive challenges for learners of alphabetic language, many of whom find it difficult to master (Orton, 2008). As reported by the Foreign Service Institute in Washington DC, it will take an L1 English speaker approximately 2,200 hours to become proficient in Chinese, a figure that is imposingly high when compared to the 600 hours required for proficiency in French. Therefore, CFL learners are expected to work hard through rote learning, modelling the teacher and memorisation (Leng, 2005), which may explain the dominance of the teacher-lectured approach in Chinese language classrooms (Scölon, 1999). This is particularly true with mainland teachers of Chinese, as they have been educated in a similar way (Simmons, 1995). However, the prevalent use of this approach has encountered challenges in Western contexts wherein education is informed by a constructivist approach to learning (Du & Kirkebæk, 2012; Moloney & Xu, 2012; Zhang & Li, 2010). Therefore, the provision of a CFL pedagogy which shares values and approaches with the Western

context is of great significance for the improvement of CFL teaching and learning (McGinnis, 1996; Moloney & Xu, 2012).

Third, the shortage of qualified teachers of CFL inhibits its further development. It is estimated that the vast majority of CFL teachers are L1 speakers who were born in China and educated in Chinese tertiary institutions (Orton, 2011; Stewart & Wang, 2005). These teachers fill the increasing demand of CFL teaching, but the quality of their teaching remains questionable given the fact that some of them have neither official qualifications for teaching nor any professional linguistic background of the Chinese language. Even though the teachers sent by Hanban have teaching experience and certification, those who specialised in Chinese language teaching are still few in number (Tse, 2009; Zhang & Li, 2010). As for professional CFL teachers, they were mainly trained in Chinese literature and culture, with little attention to language education (Zhou, 2011). As a result, CFL has been poorly taught, which presents challenges to the learners, namely that teachers do not know how to effectively deal with them, a fact which contributes to the high attrition rate. Clearly, the point here is not to undervalue these CFL teachers, but rather to highlight the importance of qualified teachers in light of the efficacy of CFL teaching and learning. As Zhang and Li (2010) note, ‘teachers are a decisive and guiding factor in the whole process of teaching and learning’ (p. 94).

Last, little research has been conducted on the teaching and learning of CFL. Mainstream research on Chinese language has focused on Chinese linguistics and Chinese literature, but little is known about Chinese language education (Tse, 2009). It is only in recent years that researchers have started to address issues related to Chinese language pedagogy (Du & Kirkebæk, 2012; Xing, 2006) and CFL teacher education and professional development (Duff & Lester, 2008; Orton, 2011). However, results of the research have not been sufficiently applied by teachers to their classroom practices (Ke & Shen, 2003), leading to a divide between researchers and teachers. This divide has highlighted the critical need for teachers to observe their own classrooms in order to gain a deeper understanding of the teaching and learning process. Additionally, little research has taken a learning perspective as a point of departure to investigate issues in classroom contexts concerning how learners learn CFL, how teachers can provide learners with more opportunities for learning or how teaching can be made to better serve learning. The dearth of research material in this area has become a key bottleneck for the development of Chinese language pedagogy and for the improvement of CFL teaching and learning, which makes this Ph.D. research both urgent and essential.

### **1.3. STRUCTURE OF THIS PH.D. THESIS**

This Ph.D. thesis is qualitative and descriptive in orientation and includes four peer-reviewed papers. The thesis consists of the following two parts:

1) A report that provides an overview of this Ph.D. research, including:

- (1). Backdrop of this Ph.D. research
- (2). Introduction
- (3). Theoretical background
- (4). Research question
- (5). Research design and methodology
- (6). Findings and conclusions
- (7). Contributions and limitations

2) Appendices include:

- (1). Four-articles produced out of this study
- (2). Interview guidelines used in paper 1 and 3
- (3). Co-authorship statement of paper 1

#### **1.4. PUBLISHED/UNDER-REVIEW PAPERS INCLUDED IN THIS PH.D. THESIS**

The four papers included in this Ph.D. thesis are presented separately, but some internal connections can be found among them. Specifically, the results of Paper 1 serve as a basis for the issues addressed in Papers 2 and 3. Although the two papers have a different focus, both reflect the important role the teacher played in the classroom teaching and learning process. Lastly, Paper 4 is generated from the findings resulting from Papers 1-3, focusing on teacher language use as a strategy to make classroom interaction more facilitative for language learning. The details of each paper are displayed below:

1. Bao, R., & Du, X.Y. (2015). Implementation of Task-based Language Teaching in Chinese as a Foreign Language: Benefits and Challenges. *Language, Culture, and Curriculum*. (accepted)
2. Bao, R., (2015). A sociocultural approach to learner-learner collaborative interaction in Chinese as a foreign language class: implications for Chinese language pedagogy. *Globe: A Journal of Language, Culture, and Communication* (Under review)

3. Bao, R., (2014). Sociocultural perspective of the teacher's roles in promoting learners' involvement in Chinese as a foreign language class. *Language Teaching Research* (Under review)
4. Bao, R., (2015). An investigation of teacher language use in teacher-fronted interaction in a Chinese as a foreign language classroom: a sociocultural perspective. *Classroom Discourse* (Under review)

Paper 1 seeks to explore learners' perceptions of task-based language teaching (TBLT) given the fact that the context in which task implementation takes place has a major impact on what is feasible and desirable for learners. Through the method of semi-structured interviews and participant observation, this paper provides additional support for the positive effects of TBLT on CFL teaching and learning. Meanwhile, it highlights the point that the implementation of TBLT must be adjusted to the local context in order to maximise its value for L2 teaching and learning. As for the beginners in CFL, a weak version of TBLT is suggested since learners expressed a preference to have task-based pair work and teacher-led instruction used together. As such, the classroom learning process is mainly operated by two sections: task-based learner-learner interaction and teacher-fronted teacher-learner interaction. From this, it is suggested that interaction is a critical factor to understanding the classroom learning process and how teaching can make classroom interaction function in such a way that learning is enhanced.

Paper 2 is informed by the sociocultural theory of mind (SCT) with an attempt to examine whether and how learner-learner interaction contributes to L2 Chinese learning during collaborative tasks. Seen from a SCT perspective, learning takes place as learners move through their ZPD, which is to say they progress from what they cannot do independently to what they can do with the assistance of others. Through the method of microgenetic analysis, we see that complete beginners of CFL are able to assist each other in constructing opportunities for learning. However, results also suggest the critical role of teacher in giving feedback to the linguistic knowledge discussed during learner-learner interaction afterwards, consolidating the positive outcomes of this interaction.

Paper 3 draws on the principles of exploratory practice and investigates the teacher's roles in creating opportunities for L2 Chinese learning during teacher-learner interaction. Informed by the sociocultural theory, this study identifies four roles that the teacher plays in creating opportunities for learning by employing a range of verbal and nonverbal discursive strategies to involve learners in the interactional process. However, analysing the learners' interview data also highlights the point that although well-intentioned, the effectiveness of the teacher's strategies in mediating learners' participation is somehow subject to different learner factors such as learning strategy, affective concerns, language aptitude and

motivation. This also points to the complexity of classroom interaction and L2 learning.

Paper 4 seeks to explore how to create classroom interaction in such a way that learning is enhanced by focusing on teacher language use and its effects on the learning opportunities that arise during teacher-learner interaction. Drawing on the principles of exploratory practice, the microgenetic analysis of the video transcripts shows that some features of teacher language use facilitate L2 Chinese learning, while some work against it. This self-reflective enquiry helps to raise the teacher's awareness of her language use and prompts consideration of how she may effectively use her language to promote L2 learning. Findings of this study also have benefits for other teachers who wish to understand how to make effective use of their language to create more dynamic interactions and enhance learning.

Seeing the four papers from a holistic perspective, this Ph.D. research helps gain a better understanding of interaction in a classroom comprised of complete beginners of CFL and L2 Chinese learning. Such understandings are very informative for curriculum planners, material designers and front-line practitioners in relation to CFL instructional practices, providing insight into how one can create classroom interaction that is more likely to promote learning as well as yielding pointers for CFL teacher education and professional development.

## CHAPTER 2. INTRODUCTION

L2 language researchers have been interested in classroom learning contexts and focused on exploring how teaching can be made more efficient and effective in order to promote L2 learning. This line of research has witnessed a major shift, moving from a focus on comparing the effectiveness of different teaching methods to a focus on examining what exactly goes on in the learners' interaction in collaborative activities in the classroom. This shift is due primarily to the fact that little difference among these teaching methods has been identified, as the 'classroom is too complex to be compared as unitary phenomena' (Williams, 2012: 541). This has led classroom research to a new era in which the classroom itself becomes the focus (Long, 1980; Williams, 2012). Earlier research in this direction has mainly focused on 'the kind of input the learners receive and the kind of output they produce' (Takahashi, 1999: 392). However, recent researchers have started to realise the importance of examining the process between input and output and how it relates to language learning.

As such, the role of interaction has been brought to the fore, as it is fair to say that interaction lies at the heart of everything that happens in classrooms (Walsh, 2011). Research to date on interaction has been mainly informed by two different theoretical paradigms. One is based on *cognitive perspective* that views interaction as an instrumental tool that stimulates individual cognitive activity to process the input and produce it in the form of output through which learning is facilitated (Long, 1996). Thus, this paradigm is also referred to as the input-output approach. The other paradigm falls under the framework of sociocultural theory, emphasising learning as a socially situated activity wherein interaction is critical in shaping learners' participation in their own development and the path it follows (Ellis, 1990). Despite working from different standpoints, both paradigms underpin the importance of interaction in the process of L2 learning. It is this importance that has been the impetus for the move towards providing learners with more interaction opportunities in classrooms. This has led to the prevalent use of the task-based approach in L2 classrooms, as task completion requires learners' interaction, allowing them to receive feedback on their L2 production, notice gaps in their knowledge, and then shape and reshape their L2 production in a target-like manner (Long, 1996).

A large body of empirical work has shown the positive effects that task-based interaction has on classroom teaching and learning (Pica & Doughty, 1985; Mackey, 1999; Ellis, 2000; 2003). However, the research to date has been mainly conducted in a controlled setting by focusing on non-beginner learners of European languages such as English, Spanish and French. Little is known about complete beginners of non-European languages, especially in classroom contexts. This is

particularly true in the case of teaching and learning Chinese as a foreign language (CFL). In addition, given the challenges revealed when the task-based approach is applied to some contexts in which learners are accustomed to a highly-structured, teacher-led approach and are reluctant to take initiatives or risks in the learning process (Burrows, 2008; Carless, 2002, 2003; Li, 1998; McDonough & Chaikitmongkol, 2007), we can infer that the implementation of task-based approach should be sensitive to a particular group of learners, highlighting the need to consider learners' experiences in L2 language learning and their perceptions of task performance in order to optimise the effectiveness of task-based interaction on classroom teaching. As noted by Freeman and Johnson (1998), 'any understanding of teaching must be anchored in examinations of learner and learning' (p, 409-410).

Taking this as a point of departure, this Ph.D. research seeks to explore learners' perceptions of the implementation of the task-based approach in beginning-level CFL classes, whether and how task-based interaction between complete beginners of CFL relates to L2 Chinese learning, and how teaching can create more interactional opportunities likely to promote learning. Informed by sociocultural theoretical paradigms, this study is expected to: 1) enrich our theoretical understandings of classroom interaction and its relationship to L2 learning; 2) inform classroom teaching practices so as to better enhance Chinese learning; 3) produce insights for current teacher education in relation to prioritising interaction, language use and learning on their agenda. What follows is a general review of the role of interaction in learning from the two theoretical insights.

## CHAPTER 3. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Before proceeding with the discussions of theoretical assumptions on how interaction contributes to L2 learning, it is necessary to clarify the term ‘interaction’ used in this research. According to Ellis (1999), there are two types of interaction: One is referred to as *interpersonal* interaction, which arises from face-to-face verbal exchanges, and the other occurs inside our minds and is known as *intrapersonal* interaction, similar to the concept of ‘private speech’ discussed in Vygotsky’s (1978) view. However, the focus of this research is on interpersonal interaction.

Different theoretical assumptions have been used to interpret how interaction leads to L2 learning, and of these, the interaction hypothesis and sociocultural theory are relatively more influential. They are presented respectively below.

### 3.1. COGNITIVE PERSPECTIVE OF INTERACTION AND L2 LEARNING: THE INTERACTION HYPOTHESIS

Earlier research on interaction has been based primarily on cognitive perspective, with Long’s interaction hypothesis being the most influential piece. By admitting the role of comprehensible input in L2 acquisition, Long (1980) argues that negotiation of meaning facilitates L2 learning, as it helps learners to make input comprehensible. In his updated version of the interaction hypothesis, Long (1996) extends the function of negotiation of meaning to a broad context in which it enables learners to receive feedback on their L2 production, notice gaps in their linguistic knowledge and modify their L2 productions to be more target-like, thus promoting L2 learning. Informed by this assumption, substantial research has investigated what types of task and in what conditions can best stimulate learners’ negotiation by quantifying the occurrence of three main negotiation moves: comprehension check, clarification request and confirmation check. In a similar approach, researchers have also extended examination to other interactional mechanisms such as feedback (Lyster & Ranta, 1997; Mackey, Gass, & McDonough, 2000; Mackey, 2006; Mackey, Oliver, & Leeman, 2003; Sheen, 2004), noticing (Schmidt, 1990) and modified output (Swain, 1995), as well as their effects on L2 learning. Research in this line has not only identified a positive relationship between task-based interaction and L2 learning, but also laid the foundation of the position of the task-based approach in language education.

Nevertheless, of note is that this line of research has received some criticism. First, limiting learner-learner interaction to negotiation of meaning only provides a partial understanding of the relationship between interaction and learning. In effect,



increasing empirical evidence has noted that other interactional aspects also have potential contributions to the process of learning (Foster & Ohta, 2005; Brooks & Donato, 1994; Brooks, Donato & McGlone, 1997). Second, most of the research has been carried out in a controlled setting to examine the occurrence of negotiation during tasks. It remains questionable as to whether the results can be transferred to a dynamic classroom context. Indeed, research has revealed that negotiation of meaning occurs in a very limited amount in classroom contexts (Foster, 1998; Foster & Ohta, 2005). Finally, interaction in itself is a dynamic and complex construct; one cannot simply interpret the relationship between interaction and learning by means of a set of static numbers. As van Lier (1996) argues, merely counting the instances of negotiation of meaning may cause one to miss the potential effects of qualitative aspects of interaction on L2 learning. This calls for a holistic and qualitative perspective to examine interaction, a view which is very much in line with the position of sociocultural theory.

### **3.2. SOCIOCULTURAL PERSPECTIVE OF INTERACTION AND L2 LEARNING**

The sociocultural theory of mind (SCT) has its origins in the works of Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978), but has been further developed by contemporary researchers in the field of L2 language education (Lantolf, 2000; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). The fundamental concept of SCT is that the higher form of human cognitive development, including learning, is a social process mediated by various kinds of tools, either physical or symbolic, with language being the most important (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Simply put, just as humans use physical tools to change their surroundings, we also deploy symbolic signs, primarily language, to regulate our mental activities to solve problems or develop a new insight. Significantly, these regulatory tools are not pre-existing but are constructed in a social process wherein the individual interacts with his or her biological functions and with others in a dynamic way (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Through constant participation in this social activity, individuals gradually assimilate these constructed tools, most notably, language, into their own abilities and voluntarily use them both socially and cognitively. This is to say that the source of human development resides in the social environment that humans actively change and that in turn changes them (Vygotsky, 1987). It is then claimed that interaction as a social event is a source of development. This is captured well by Vygotsky's genetic law of development, according to which any function of a child's cultural development appears twice, first in the social plane between people, then in the individual plane within the child.

As such, cognitive development is firstly regulated by other people (i.e., other-regulation); through constant participation, the child gains increasing control over his/her mental activities, leading to linguistic and cognitive self-regulation. According to Vygotsky, the transition of functions from other-regulation to self-

regulation occurs in the zone of proximal development (ZPD), a construct defined as:

*“The difference between the child’s developmental level as determined by the independent problem solving and the higher level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (Vygotsky, 1978:86)”.*

In accordance with this concept, the driving force behind learning is the collaboration between a novice and a more expert or adult, as it is this collaboration that enables the individual novice to bridge the gap in the ZPD. Turning to a L2 classroom, teaching is not a linear knowledge-transmission from teacher to learner but an assisting performance in which teacher mediates learners in moving from what they cannot do individually to what they can do with assistance, a process leading to the ultimate goal of self-regulation (Gánem-Gutiérrez, 2013). Central to this mediation is the dialogic process in which the teacher helps learners to bridge the gap within the ZPD. In other words, the role of the teacher is to guide learners to construct linguistic knowledge by means of language as a cognitive tool (Mercer, 1995). For this reason, teacher language use has to provide learners with opportunities to participate in dialogic interaction, as without this participation, it is virtually impossible to discover learners’ ZPD, and then no development will occur.

Within the concept of ZPD, potential development never ceases, as each stage of development is a result of the previous one, the result of which, in turn, becomes the basis for further advanced development (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Thus, SCT-oriented scholars view learning not as ‘products and states’ but as ‘changes and processes’ (Schinke-Llano, 1995:22). Since language is the essential regulatory tool, the genesis of learning can be traced by documenting learners’ linguistic changes along with their participation in dialogue and increasing ability to use the new language, the latter of which is constructed by this participation in order to voluntarily control their social and mental activities (Lantolf, 2005). In other words, learning entails learners’ participation in the shaping and reshaping of their own understandings during the interaction with adults. This shaping and reshaping process contributes to L2 learning.

To summarise, theorists have interpreted the relationship between interaction and learning from different perspectives. Certainly, the point here is not to compare the advantages and disadvantages of the two theoretical paradigms, but to highlight the critical role of interaction in the process of learning. This view of interaction has also informed classroom instructional practices, of which the rise of task-based language teaching is the most representative.

### **3.3. TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING: BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES**

The last two decades have seen an increasing interest in task-based language teaching (TBLT) in L2 education. This interest directly relates to the view that interaction is regarded as being critical to language learning. Indeed, a large volume of research has explored task-based interaction and L2 learning, which has been mainly based on the two theoretical paradigms mentioned above.

#### **3.3.1. TASK-BASED INTERACTION FROM THE INTERACTION HYPOTHESIS**

Informed by the interaction hypothesis, this line of research has mainly examined the effects of task variables on the occurrence of negotiation of meaning by quantifying the three interactional moves, namely, clarification request, confirmation check and comprehension check. Empirical work has shown that negotiation of meaning is likely to occur when tasks: 1) require learners to exchange information (Pica, Kanagy & Falodun, 1993; Newton, 1991); 2) have a closed outcome (Crooks & Rulon, 1985; Long, 1989); 3) have a two-way exchange of information (Long, 1980). In other words, collaboration-oriented tasks provide learners with more opportunities for meaning negotiation. As for task conditions, research has found that negotiation occurs more frequently when: 1) tasks are implemented in paired or group work rather than teacher-fronted interaction (Pica & Doughty, 1985); 2) learners are required to repeat a task (Gass & Varonis, 1985); 3) interlocutors are familiar with each other (Plough & Gass, 1993). In short, this line of research has provided us with an understanding of the effects of task variables on learner performance during interaction. Such an understanding is informative for language teachers regarding how they might effectively select and implement tasks in their teaching practices.

However, some researchers have criticised this line of research for restricting the learners' interaction to a linear process from input to output, which ignores the potential contributions of other interactional aspects to the process of L2 learning (van Lier, 1996; Foster & Ohta, 2005). Moreover, the effectiveness of learners' interaction has been mainly documented in the form of numbers or figures, which has denied the dynamic and creative feature of interaction, impeding us in fully grasping the relationship between interaction and learning. This seems to suggest the need for an alternative approach that is able to consider these qualitative aspects of interaction. This approach is chiefly informed by the principles of sociocultural theory.

### 3.3.2. TASK-BASED INTERACTION FROM A SOCIOCULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

With the sociocultural perspective, interaction is viewed not as an individual instance but as a social event in which learning is nurtured collaboratively in the process of dialogue exchange. Under this view, every single social exchange emerging from this dialogic process may potentially facilitate learning. Thus, the task itself may be the same, but the process of how learners interact with each other to perform it may not be predictable. Given this, SCT-oriented researchers have been interested in exploring what exactly goes on in the learners' interaction during task performance and how this relates to L2 learning.

Some researchers have drawn on the method of microgenetic analysis and investigated learner-learner interaction generated from oral-focused tasks. These studies have found that during the interaction, learners do more than just negotiate the meaning for communication purposes; rather, they converse to develop a common understanding of task procedure, use their L1 to regulate their metatalk and contribute their expertise to co-construct the solution to language-related problems that initially cannot be accomplished by any one of them alone (Donato, 1994; Brooks & Donato, 1994; Ohta, 1995; Takahashi, 1998; Gánem-Gutiérrez 2008). Significantly, some researchers have found that learners have successfully incorporated their constructed knowledge during task-based interaction into their later use, providing solid evidence that the learners' interaction does construct opportunities for learning (Donato, 1994). Similar findings are also reported by a series of studies which examined peer revision and L2 learning (Villamil & de Guerrero, 1996; de Guerrero & Villamil, 2000). A detailed review on this line of research can be referred to Paper 2 (See Appendix A).

Some authors have also examined the role of learner-learner interaction on L2 learning by means of pre-and post-test design. A number of studies conducted by Swain and her co-researchers are mainly focused in this direction. This line of research has operationalised learner-learner interaction as language-related episodes (LREs), defined as 'any part of a dialogue where language learners talk about the language they are producing, question their language use, or correct themselves or others' (Swain & Lapkin, 1998: 326). By using LREs as a unit of analysis, these studies have noted a positive relationship between LREs and L2 learning, indicating that learner-learner interaction constitutes L2 learning in progress (de la Colina & García Mayo, 2007; Swain & Lapkin, 1998; Wanatabe & Swain, 2007; Swain & Wanatabe, 2013). Nevertheless, the findings of these studies should be considered with caution, as researchers have pointed out various contextual factors contributing to the nature of the learners' interaction (Swain & Lapkin, 1998; Wanatabe & Swain, 2007). Moreover, the positive relationship between learner-learner interaction and L2 learning does not mean that teacher is not necessary during task-based interaction. On the contrary, the incorrect solutions for LREs resulting from

learners' interaction have highlighted the critical role of the teacher in ensuring the positive outcomes of learner-learner interaction by providing feedback or extra exercise after tasks (Swain & Lapkin, 1998). As for the role of the teacher in classroom interaction, a more detailed review can be referred to Papers 3 and 4 (See Appendix A).

Collectively, it is obvious that task-based interaction is a dynamic and complex activity which plays a much broader role than merely encoding and decoding messages to get meaning across. Thus, limiting interaction to one single conversational mechanism—negotiation of meaning by the interaction hypothesis—may impede us in developing a complete picture of the relationship between interaction and L2 learning. The sociocultural perspective, however, by seeing interaction as a holistic social event, has provided us with an encompassing framework to capture the moment-by-moment interactional process and how this process contributes to learning. In the same vein, the sociocultural perspective of interaction enables us to unveil what actually happens in the learners' interaction in classrooms, the results of which can produce invaluable insights for the improvement of classroom teaching and learning. This view of interaction is also the basis for this Ph.D. research.

## CHAPTER 4. RESEARCH QUESTION

Within the sociocultural perspective, the classroom itself is a social context in which interaction relates to every oral exchange that occurs inside. Thus, it is fair to say that to better understand classroom teaching and learning, we should start by looking at interaction. A number of SCT-oriented studies have noted a positive relationship between task-based interaction and L2 learning (Donato, 1994; Swain & Lapkin, 1998; de Guerrero & Villamil, 2000; Gánem-Gutiérrez 2008;). Implications from these studies are profound for classroom processes in terms of optimising task-based activity for learning and reconceptualising the role the teacher plays in the classroom. Nevertheless, few studies have focused on complete beginners of non-European languages, especially in classroom contexts. This is particularly the case in CFL teaching and learning.

Unlike more commonly taught languages like English, CFL did not begin to receive attention among learners until the beginning of the 21st century. In recent years, the number of CFL learners has witnessed a rapid growth. Along with this growth, researchers have started to address some issues related to how to make classroom teaching effective and efficient (Bao & Kirkebæk, 2013; Xing, 2006), challenges from CFL teachers and learners (Orton, 2011; Starr, 2009; Tsung & Cruickshank, 2011; Zhou, 2011; Zhang & Li, 2010) and cultural conflicts encountered by CFL teachers (Duff & Lester, 2008; Orton, 2008). With reference to Ellis's (1999) two views of teaching, the existing research has mainly taken an external view of teaching by examining the external means (e.g., teaching method, curriculum or teaching materials) and their effects on CFL teaching and learning, the results of which, undoubtedly, are informative for curriculum planners and practitioners in relation to classroom instructional practices. However, little research has taken an internal view of teaching by examining the interaction between complete beginners of CFL and learning. Given the important position of interaction in L2 learning, there is a need for this internal view to understand teaching as a series of interactional events and unveil how interaction constructs opportunities for L2 learning.

As such, adopting both an external and internal view of teaching, this Ph.D. research, framed by sociocultural theory, seeks to explore how interaction relates to the teaching and learning of complete beginners in CFL by addressing the following research question:

*How do complete beginners of CFL interact with each other to deal with language-related problems during task-based activities and how can teaching make classroom interaction more facilitative for L2 Chinese learning?*

This research question is answered by the four sub-questions below:

1. How do complete beginners of CFL perceive the implementation of a task-based approach in CFL classes?
2. Whether and how do complete beginners of CFL construct opportunities for learning during task-based interaction?
3. In what ways does the teacher provide learners with opportunities for learning during teacher-fronted interaction?
4. What efforts can be made to inspire the kind of classroom interaction that is more likely to promote L2 learning?

To pursue the answers to these sub-questions, the empirical work, including research design, data collection and analysis, is outlined in the following section.

# **CHAPTER 5. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

Research design is the basic plan for a piece of research, including a) how the researcher intends to proceed; b) within which conceptual framework the research is to be situated; c) where and how the data is collected (Punch, 2009). In so doing, research design positions the researcher in the empirical work, connecting the research question to the data. In this sense, research design serves as a guideline that leads researchers to pursue the answers to the research question. Given the differences in the nature of research questions, the context for data collection and even the researcher's personal propensities, research design is very much context-specific (Creswell, 2008). Since this Ph.D. research takes place in the researcher's own classes, it falls into the domain of practitioner research in nature. Given that the purpose of the research is developing and understanding classroom interaction and its links to L2 teaching and learning, it is exploratory and descriptive in nature and qualitative rather than quantitative in orientation.

## **5.1. ISSUES OF METHODS FOR RESEARCHING SECOND LANGUAGE CLASSROOM**

Research in the second language classroom can be generally categorised as one of two types: formal research, which is carried out by an external researcher either in a classroom or a laboratory setting, and practitioner research, which is conducted by teachers in their own classrooms (Ellis, 2012). The research is mainly carried out in the two major traditions, referred to by different terms such as 'psychometric' and 'naturalistic' (Nunan & Bailey, 2009), or 'confirmatory' and 'descriptive' (Ellis, 2012). Given the method of data collection, the purpose and the context of this Ph.D. research, it is qualitative in orientation and descriptive as well as exploratory in nature.

### **5.1.1. A FORM OF PRACTITIONER RESEARCH: EXPLORATORY PRACTICE**

Practitioner research is developed out of the fact that knowledge generated from L2 classroom research has been largely inaccessible to the target audience—teachers—resulting in the damaging divide between L2 researchers and teachers (Allwright, 2005). To fill this divide and better inform classroom teaching, it is suggested that teachers should observe their classes and make reflections on their teaching practices (Ellis, 2012).



There are two widely-used models in practitioner research: action research (Wallace, 1998) and exploratory practice (Allwright, 2003). The former aims to find a solution to some practical issues identified in a classroom process, while the latter attempts to develop a better understanding of some aspects of L2 classroom processes, thus leading to conditions for pedagogical changes. Thus, practitioner research can produce immediate pay-offs for a teacher's practical teaching and professional development. Additionally, the insights it produces may also benefit other practitioners. However, this Ph.D. research draws on the principle of exploratory practice as it aligns with the purpose of this research, focusing on a holistic understanding of the quality of classroom life. Such an understanding will provide a foundation for making teaching more efficient and effective. As argued by Allwright (2003), 'only a serious effort to understand life in a particular setting will enable you to decide if practical change is necessary, desirable and/or possible' (p, 128).

Nevertheless, the application of any type of research has its own strengths and weaknesses, and exploratory research is no exception. In view of its practicality, exploratory practice helps to deepen teachers' understanding of their classroom processes, on the basis of which teachers are more likely to make changes for improvement. However, the generalisability of such research remains a concern, as it is conducted in the teacher's own particular instructional context. Given this, it suggests alternative criteria such as 'meaningfulness' and 'trustworthiness' (Mishler, 1990) to judge exploratory research instead of its generalisability and replicability. Moreover, even exploratory research may have limitations in contributing to our theoretical understandings of the L2 classroom; after all, its value for language pedagogy cannot be denied. As Allwright (2003: 131) argued, 'who stands to gain most, most immediately, from any improved understanding will surely be the teacher and the learners (rather than "academic researchers")'.

### **5.1.2. QUALITATIVE METHOD IN L2 CLASSROOM RESEARCH**

Earlier research on L2 classrooms mainly draws on quantitative methods to compare the effectiveness of different teaching methods as represented by scores or tests. Unfortunately, this research has failed to identify which method truly works best, as 'classrooms are too complex to be compared as unitary phenomena' (Williams, 2012:541). This failure has shifted the research direction to a qualitative method in order to capture what exactly happens in the classroom and, from there, further explore how teaching can be made effective and efficient. As Duff (2007:973) noted, 'rigorous qualitative studies in classrooms and other learning environments are now increasingly accepted as an important way of generating new knowledge and moving disciplines in innovative directions'. This is particularly the case now given the growing interest in the social, cultural and situational dimension of language and learning (van Lier, 1996), which we see alongside a growing recognition of the importance of considering teachers' and learners' perceptions of

their educational experiences in order to understand what happens in teaching-learning and why (Duff, 2007).

From a qualitative point of view, ‘research, like other things people do, is a human construction, framed and presented within a particular set of discourses (and sometimes ideologies), and conducted in a social context with certain sorts of social arrangements, involving especially funding, cognitive authority and power’ (Punch, 2009: 115). Under this view, the qualitative approach focuses on contextualised, naturalistic, holistic understandings and interpretations of phenomena that occur in particular social and cultural contexts (Duff, 2002). Given the position of the classroom as a social context adopted in this Ph.D. research, it is through a qualitative method that we are able to gain a more complete understanding of what happens in this context. Such understandings will contribute to our theoretical understandings of the L2 classroom and its relevance to language pedagogy.

Additionally, the selection of a qualitative method also resonates with the sociocultural theoretical framework adopted in this Ph.D. research. Within the sociocultural perspective, learning is viewed as a social activity mediated by language; that is, knowledge is firstly constructed by participants through interaction, and then is internalised by individuals as their own ability. Under this view, learning is a dynamic and changing process in which every single social exchange generated from the interaction is likely to facilitate learning. Documenting this process, thus, is critical to understanding how learning takes place. A qualitative method enables us to do so because it emphasises a holistic and contextualised interpretation of a phenomenon in a particular context. Moreover, given the complexity of the classroom context, it seems impossible to identify a set of universal interactional features that are broadly available to all classrooms, as what works in one instructional context may not work in another (Ellis, 2012). This gives additional support for the need of a qualitative method in the context of this Ph.D. research.

## **5.2. AN OUTLINE OF THE EMPIRICAL WORK IN THIS PH.D. RESEARCH**

The empirical work in this study is centred on its main research question—how do complete beginners of CFL interact with each other to deal with language-related problems during task-based activities and how can teaching make classroom interaction more facilitative for L2 Chinese learning? This question consists of the four sub-questions, each of which is examined and reported in the form of a paper (See figure 1).

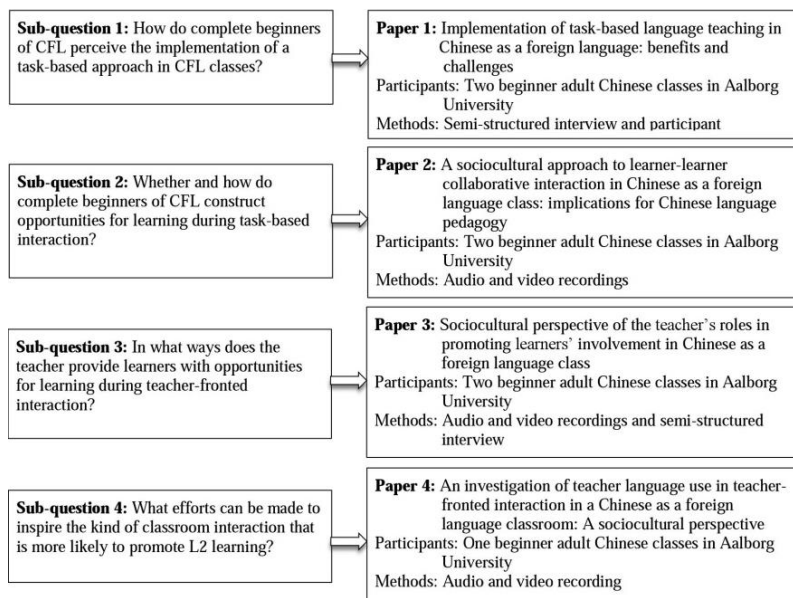


Figure 1. An outline of the empirical work in this Ph.D. study

The formulation of these sub-questions is informed by sociocultural theory, viewing learning as a social activity in which interaction plays a critical role. Under this view, everything that occurs in the classroom relates to the social interaction either between teacher and learners or among learners themselves. As a result, it can be said that interaction is central to classroom teaching and learning. This view of interaction gives one account for the popularity of the task-based approach throughout the world, as task completion stimulates the learners' interaction by leading them to use the target language, which is claimed to be conducive to L2 learning. However, the context-dependent feature of this approach has highlighted the critical need to consider learners' perceptions and learning experiences in order to optimise its value for classroom teaching. It is this need that leads to the first sub-question by focusing on learners' perceptions of the task-based approach. The results of the study fuelled by the first sub-question serve as a basis for sub-questions 2 and 3, aiming to explore whether and how learning takes place in task-based interaction between learners and how teachers can provide learners with more opportunities for learning in teacher-fronted interaction. The findings generated by these two sub-questions lead to the proposal of sub-question 4 by focusing on teacher language use as a strategy to make classroom interaction effective and efficient. The relationship among these sub-questions is displayed in Figure 2.

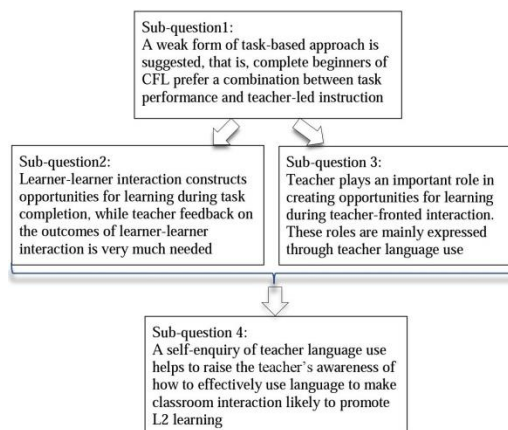


Figure 2. A relationship among the four sub-research questions

### 5.3. DATA COLLECTION

Multiple methods were used to collect the data needed for answering the four sub-questions proposed in this Ph.D. research. Given the nature of practitioner research, data used in this Ph.D. study was generated in the teacher's own classrooms with adult students who were complete beginners of CFL. Table 1 displays the multiple resources of data collected for this study.

*Table 1. An overview of data used in the sub-research questions*

Sub-questions	Collecting Time	Source of Data	Methods
Sub-question 1	Feb-May, 2013	Two beginner classes -Class A (9) -Class B (9)	-Individual interviews -Participant observation
Sub-question 2	Sep-Dec, 2013	Two beginner classes -Class C (two pairs) -Class D (two pairs)	-Audio-video recordings
Sub-question 3	Sep-Dec, 2013	Two beginner classes -Class C (15) -Class D (10)	-Audio-video recordings -Individual interviews
Sub-question 4	Sep-Dec, 2013	One beginner class -Class C (15)	-Audio-video recordings

#### 5.3.1. DATA COLLECTED FOR SUB-QUESTION 1

The formation of sub-question 1 is premised on the assumption that the task-based approach is effective in providing learners with opportunities for interaction; however, this effectiveness is sensitive to a particular group of learners. It is thus necessary to investigate learners' perceptions and their learning experiences with the task-based approach. For this reason, the interview method is used, as it is regarded as a good way of assessing people's perceptions, ideas and definitions of

situations or phenomena (Punch, 2009). This interview was semi-structured. It was carried out individually after the end of the two beginner adult CFL classes (Class A and Class B) in the spring semester of 2013. Meanwhile, participant observation is used as a secondary data resource to triangulate the interview data in order to better understand the implementation of the task-based approach. The observation notes focus on learners' performances and reactions during tasks, which are kept by the teacher either at the end of each lesson or in the process of tasks in both classes. The specific information about the two classes can be referred to Paper 1 (See Appendix A).

### **5.3.2. DATA COLLECTED FOR SUB-QUESTIONS 2-4**

As mentioned earlier, sub-questions 2 and 3 were developed from the results generated by sub-question 1—a weak form of the task-based approach is suggested in complete beginner CFL classes since learners prefer a combination of task completion and teacher-fronted instruction together. Thus, to understand classroom teaching and learning, it is necessary to investigate the learners' interaction during task completion and teacher-learner interaction during teacher-fronted instruction. Given this, sub-question 2 seeks to address whether and how learner-learner interaction constructs learning opportunities during tasks, while sub-question 3 focuses on how the teacher creates opportunities for learning during teacher-fronted interaction. The data used to answer these two questions was collected in two other, similar CFL classes (Class C and Class D) during the fall semester of 2013 (See paper 3 in Appendix A). Video-recording was used as the main method to capture the interaction process. Specifically, two small video cameras were set in front of the randomly-chosen pair learners during tasks, while one big camera was set in front of the classroom to document teacher-fronted instruction. Additionally, given the issues of reliability and validity in practitioner research, semi-structured interviews with learners were conducted to provide triangulation to the video transcripts generated by the teacher-fronted interaction in sub-question 3.

In short, the results of sub-questions 2 and 3 contribute to our understandings of classroom interaction and CFL learning. Taking these understandings as a point of departure, sub-question 4 draws on the principles of exploratory practice and attempts to explore how teaching can make classroom interaction more likely to promote learning by focusing on the quality of teacher language use during teacher-learner interaction. Data for sub-question 4 was also generated from Class C through video-recording.

## **5.4. DATA ANALYSIS**

In line with the nature of research design in this Ph.D. study, qualitative data analysis was carried out on all sets of data resources mentioned above. Given the

richness and complexity of the social context that qualitative research seeks to explain (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996), there is no single methodological framework or ‘right way’ to do qualitative data analysis (Punch, 2009). For this Ph.D. research, two techniques were used: the inductive approach and the microgenetic approach. Specifically, an inductive approach was applied to analyse the observation notes and the interview transcripts used in Paper 1 and the interview transcripts used in Paper 3, while the microgenetic approach focused on the video-recording transcripts used in Papers 2-4. Each approach is discussed in the following section.

### 5.4.1. INDUCTIVE APPROACH TO THE DATA USED IN PAPER 1 AND 3

The inductive approach is a commonly-used strategy for qualitative data analysis. It primarily depends on detailed and iterative readings of the raw data to develop concepts or establish themes through interpretation (Thomas, 2006); in other words, in an inductive analysis, research findings are grounded in the raw data itself. The procedures used to do so are diverse, although some researchers have sought to identify a common framework (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Thomas, 2006; Creswell, 2008). The analysis conducted in this Ph.D. research is consistent with the procedures proposed by Creswell (2008) as shown in Figure 3.

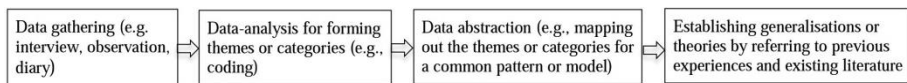


Figure 3. An inductive approach for qualitative data analysis (Creswell, 2008)

Central to this procedure are the ways in which the data is analysed. In this Ph.D. research, this is done via the grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This approach constitutes three conceptually distinct but not necessarily sequential steps: conceptually categorising data, establishing relationships between these categories and conceptualising these relationships (Punch, 2009). However, coding is critical to this procedure. In line with this approach, two levels of coding are conducted: open coding, or breaking the data points into small pieces and categorising them, and axial coding, which is tracing out the relationships among the categories and identifying patterns or regularities. These identified patterns or regularities are treated as the final findings, which are then interpreted and verified with reference to the researcher’s experiences or the existing literature. This process of inductive analysis is captured well in Strauss and Corbin’s (1998) description, ‘the researcher begins with an area of study and allows the theory to emerge from the data’ (p, 12).

#### **5.4.2. MICROGENETIC ANALYSIS TO THE VIDEO TRANSCRIPTS USED IN PAPER 2-4**

The adoption of the microgenetic method echoes with the sociocultural theoretical paradigm on which this Ph.D. research is based. From a sociocultural perspective, learning focuses on changes and processes rather than products and states (Schinke-Llano, 1995). Said another way, learning is inherent in the ongoing dialogic process that arises in the learners' interaction in problem-solving activities.

To capture this process, Vygotsky (1978) argues for the need of a method that is able to trace human mental development in a very detailed way, or in other words, a method that helps researchers to 'return to the source and reconstructs all the points in the development of a given structure' (p. 65). To do so, Vygotsky (1978) proposes the genetic method. This method includes four domains with different angles to interpret the process of human development. Among them, the *microgenetic* domain focuses on the overt, in-flight, instance of learning 'over a relatively short span of time (for example...learning a word, sound, or grammatical feature of a language' (Lantolf, 2000: 3). Given this, microgenetic analysis enables researchers to capture the moment-to-moment qualitative linguistic changes generated from social interaction, or in Vygotsky's words, 'to grasp the process in flight' (Vygotsky, 1978: 68). According to sociocultural theory, these changes are crucial, as they represent learners' increasing L2 competence within the ZPD; essentially, it can be said that these changes amount to the occurrence of learning. As Belz and Kinginger (2003: 594) noted, microgenetic analysis is a method to observe skill acquisition during a learning event and 'to examine specific instances of the development'.

## CHAPTER 6. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

This Ph.D. research seeks to pursue the answer to the research question: ‘How do complete beginners of CFL interact with each other to deal with language-related problems during task-based activities and how can teaching make classroom interaction more facilitative for L2 Chinese learning?’ It is answered by four sub-questions, which are separately reported upon in four papers. As mentioned above, the four papers are internally connected, and the findings therein collectively contribute to our understanding of classroom interaction and L2 classroom teaching and learning. The point that each paper highlights is displayed below:

1. Understanding learners’ perceptions in language learning is critical to L2 classroom teaching and learning
2. Learner-learner interaction during tasks constructs opportunities for learning but involves the teacher’s role in consolidating this positive outcome
3. Teacher plays a critical role in providing learners with opportunities for learning during teacher-fronted interaction
4. Teacher should improve the use of language in a way that makes classroom interaction more facilitative for L2 learning

Seeing this Ph.D. research from a holistic perspective, there are the interconnected relationships among the sub-questions, papers and findings. This relationship is presented in Figure 4.



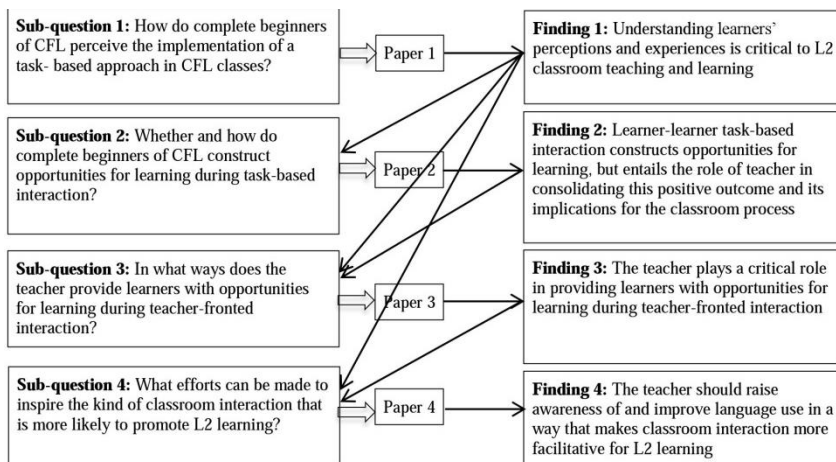


Figure 4. The relationship between the four sub-questions, papers and correspondent findings

As shown in Figure 4, Finding 1 is a result from Paper 1 in response to sub-question 1, which provides an introductory basis for the following sub-questions addressed in Papers 2, 3 and 4, respectively. Finding 2 is drawn from Paper 2, which responds to sub-question 2 but also has some connections with the questions discussed in Paper 3. Finding 3 is a result from Paper 3, which is a response to sub-question 3. Finding 4 has some implications for Papers 1, 2 and 3, but it focuses on responding to sub-question 4. This internal connection among the four papers provides a thread that connects them into a coherent picture of this Ph.D. research. The four findings represent the final conclusions of this study, each of which is discussed in the following section.

## 6.1. UNDERSTANDING LEARNERS' PERCEPTIONS IN LANGUAGE LEARNING IS CRITICAL TO L2 CLASSROOM TEACHING AND LEARNING

This Ph.D. research is premised on the sociocultural theoretical assumption that learning originates from a social activity wherein interaction plays a pivotal role. Taking this as a point of departure, a classroom is a social context in its own right. It can then be said that any endeavour to understand and improve teaching and learning should look at classroom interaction. It is this view of interaction that has led to the prevalent use of task-based language teaching (TBLT), as task completion provides learners with opportunities for interaction. However, research on TBLT has revealed mixed results, highlighting the need to consider the effects of the context in which TBLT takes place, especially the learner factor.

As such, Paper 1 focuses on learners' perceptions of the implementation of TBLT in CFL classes, leading to the conclusions: 1) effects of TBLT on complete beginners of CFL: benefits and challenges; and 2) a weak form of TBLT: combining task completion and teacher-fronted instruction together for complete beginners of CFL.

### **6.1.1. EFFECTS OF TBLT ON COMPLETE BEGINNERS OF CFL: BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES**

Paper 1 provides additional support on the positive effects of TBLT for classroom teaching and learning in terms of learner participation, opportunities to speak the target language and an interactive learning environment. As an extension, it may lead learners to a pleasant learning experience, thus boosting their learning motivation. This increasing motivation is significant for Chinese language learners, especially in a foreign language context where more efforts might be needed at the early stage of learning due to limited L2 resources on a daily basis. Moreover, this finding is insightful for CFL teachers seeking to improve their teaching, especially those who teach learners with lower proficiency levels. This improvement is not only conducive to increasing the quality of CFL teachers as a whole, but may also help to alleviate the high attrition rate among CFL learners reported by previous research (Orton, 2008; Zhang & Li, 2010).

However, results of this paper show that although learners enjoy task performance, they desire more diversity in task design and task conditions. For instance, they expect tasks that: 1) have more challenges; 2) are completed by individuals; and 3) have a focus on Chinese pronunciation. It seems to indicate that the successful implementation of TBLT is affected not only by individual learners' differences in learning strategy, learning style and so forth, but also by the features of the target language, Chinese in this case. This is also consistent with the point that performing any teaching method must be sensitive to its context (Kumaravadivelu, 2001; Ellis, 1999). As Nunan (1995: 133) puts it, 'the context in which any teaching takes place will have a major influence on what is both feasible and desirable'. It is the role of context that explains why different forms of TBLT may be suggested in specific contexts (Carless, 2003; Burrows, 2008). This leads to another conclusion generated by Paper 1.

### **6.1.2. A WEAK FORM OF TBLT: COMBINING TASK COMPLETION AND TEACHER-FRONTED INSTRUCTION FOR COMPLETE BEGINNERS OF CFL**

Given the position of tasks placed in the classroom, Skehan (1998) proposes two forms of TBLT: A strong form in which classroom teaching is centred on different tasks, and a weak form that treats tasks as a complementary facilitation mechanism in conjunction with teacher-led instruction. Results of Paper 1 show that 1)

complete beginners of CFL desire the teacher's role in grammar instruction and Chinese pronunciation practices; 2) learners prefer the interchange between task-based interaction and teacher-fronted instruction together instead of the class being dominated by either of them alone. It follows that a weak form of TBLT is more appropriate for complete beginners of CFL. Two reasons are suggested for this. First, task completion puts learners in the context of communicating with each other by using L2, which makes them feel more accomplished. Second, teacher-fronted instruction enables complete beginners of CFL to further clarify and reflect on what they have used during tasks, which in turn helps to consolidate their L2 knowledge.

As such, on the basis of the findings in Paper 1, we can say that complete beginners of CFL teaching constitute two micro-contexts: learner-learner interaction during tasks and teacher-learner interaction during teacher-fronted instruction. Thus, to gain an understanding of CFL classroom teaching and learning is to explore exactly what occurs in the two micro-contexts and how teaching can make classroom interaction more acquisition-rich. As such, teaching can never just perform a method in a top-down manner; rather, it is about managing classroom interaction in such a way as to provide as many opportunities for learning as possible (Allwright, 1984). This leads to the two views of teaching proposed by Ellis (1999). In Ellis's view, the external view equips teachers with the 'what' and the 'how' in teaching, which provides a foundation from which to further investigate what happens in teaching-learning and why from an internal perspective. Such investigation, in turn, will then better feed the development of teaching practices emphasised by an external perspective. Therefore, the adoption of the two perspectives of teaching is critical for us to gain a better understanding of classroom teaching and learning.

Applying the two views of teaching to this Ph.D. research, Paper 1 aligns with the external view by investigating the implementation of the task-based method from learners' perspectives. Papers 2-4, informed by the internal view of teaching, examines whether and how learning emerges in the course of dialogic interaction and how teaching can make classroom interaction facilitative for L2 learning. Findings resulting from Paper 2 are presented below.

## **6.2. LEARNER-LEARNER INTERACTION DURING TASKS CONSTRUCTS OPPORTUNITIES FOR LEARNING BUT INVOLVES THE TEACHER'S ROLE IN CONSOLIDATING THIS POSITIVE OUTCOME**

Informed by sociocultural theory, increasing evidence has shown the contributions of the learners' interaction in task-based activities to L2 learning (Donato, 1994; Ohta, 1995; Swain & Lapkin, 1998). Nevertheless, the context-sensitive nature of interactional support between different pairs of learners makes it impossible to identify a set of universal interactive discourses that promote learning (Ellis, 2012).

Paper 2 explores the interaction between complete beginners of CFL and its relationship to learning, the findings of which are discussed as follows.

### **6.2.1. THE POSITIVE LEARNING BENEFITS OF TASK-BASED INTERACTION BETWEEN COMPLETE BEGINNERS**

Paper 2 shows that during task completion, complete beginners of CFL are able to provide each other with assistance, correct or self-correct their L2 productions, and co-construct their understandings and L2 meanings, the performance of which leads them to accomplish a higher level of function that initially cannot be achieved alone. From an SCT perspective, this accomplishment represents learners' increasing ability within the ZPD by appropriating their co-constructed linguistic knowledge generated from interaction. Although it is too early to claim that learners have internalised this knowledge into their own linguistic systems or can use it independently at a later occasion, at least it shows that learning has taken place at a given point of this ongoing interactional process. In other words, complete beginners of CFL construct opportunities for learning during tasks. This finding is impressive since it not only enriches the application of the sociocultural theoretical paradigm to learners with lower proficiency levels, but also produces greater insights for CFL instructional practices in relation to the use of task-based activities.

As mentioned earlier, CFL teaching and learning has been on a rapid rise only in the past decade. Compared with a range of well-developed teaching methods in English as the target language, CFL is poorly taught. Most CFL classes are still presented in a teacher-lectured approach (Orton, 2011). However, this approach has suffered many setbacks in the Western context, which has become a key bottleneck for the sustainable development of CFL education (Du & Kirkebæk, 2012; Orton, 2011; Zhang & Li, 2010). Certainly, the point here is not to deny the position of this approach in the L2 classroom, but rather to highlight the need to investigate some Western-oriented methods such as a task-based approach to CFL classes, as addressed in Paper 1. However, research to date on this area has been mainly descriptive, documenting the advantages and disadvantages of TBLT (Bao, 2012a, 2012b; Bao & Kirkebæk, 2013; Kirkebæk, 2012). Few studies have explored whether and how task-based interaction between complete beginners of CFL contributes to learning.

The findings of Paper 2 provide knowledge in this respect. Although it is not clear whether or how long learners retain the constructed-knowledge from the interaction, given the positive effects of the task-based approach reported in Paper 1, it can at least be claimed that task-based interaction between complete beginners of CFL creates a context in which learning is promoted. This claim sheds great light on CFL teachers in relation to the efficiency of classroom teaching and learning.

### **6.2.2. REVALUATION ON LEARNERS' L1 USE DURING CLASSROOM INTERACTION PROCESSES**

Discussion on learners' L1 use in the L2 classroom is neither unique nor new. However, the sociocultural theoretical paradigm provides us with a different perspective from which to see the role of L1 in the process of L2 learning. This perspective is based primarily on the fundamental concept of sociocultural theory stating that the higher form of human cognitive development is mediated by various artefacts, the foremost of which is language (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Thus, language not only conveys the meaning of a message but also functions as a psychological tool, mediating learners in accessing knowledge and making sense of it. Swain (2006) describes this use of language as 'linguaging'—'the process of making meaning and shaping knowledge and experience through language' (p. 98). Increasing evidence has shown that languaging is a source of L2 learning (Swain, 2010; Swain, Lapkin, Knouzi, Suzuki & Brooks, 2009). This view of language underpins the critical need for reevaluating the position of L1 use in L2 classroom, especially for learners with low L2 proficiency, as in the case of this study.

Paper 2 indicates that L1 use creates a favourable context for L2 learning since it acts as a critical cognitive tool that mediates learners in constructing effective dialogue during task completion. Specifically, the use of L1 helps learners establish their common understandings of the given task and mediates learners in organising their mental activities to reflect on their L2 productions and construct solutions to the problems. Moreover, it also helps to create a relaxed learning atmosphere in which learners feel free to take risks and experience creative use of the L2 language. Without L1 use, it is difficult to imagine how these beginners would be able to construct their dialogue to solve the linguistic problems encountered during tasks. In de Guerrero and Villamil's (2000: 64) words, 'stifling the use of the L1 in collaborative activity in an L2 classroom may not be a wise pedagogical practice because it discourages the employment of a critical psychological tool that is essential for collaboration'.

Certainly, this does not mean that L1 use should be encouraged in the L2 classroom, but neither does it mean that L1 should be blindly prohibited. Concern regarding L1 use lies in the view that too much of it will reduce opportunities for learners to use L2. However, empirical evidence has noted that the amount of L1 use decreases as learners' L2 competence develops over time, indicating that L1 use is a normal psycholinguistic process (Brooks & Donato, 1994; Brooks, Donato, & McGlone, 1997). Given this, researchers have suggested alternative criteria to judge L1 use; that is, instead of its quantity, L1 use should be judged by the quality in relation to the context of interaction and the nature of the task in which it takes place (Wells, 1998; de Guerrero & Villamil, 2000). This criteria on L1 use is very informative for L2 teachers, especially with lower proficiency learners, and thus it can be argued that teachers should reconsider the role of L1 use and optimise it in

the L2 learning process rather than treating it as a disadvantage and prohibiting it. As argued by Antón and Dicamilla (1999), the prohibition of L1 use in the L2 classroom effectively deprived learners of using this powerful psychological tool to meet the demands of the tasks in L2 learning. Certainly, the balance between L1 and L2 use, and to what extent L1 use promotes L2 learning, are worthy of more attention despite being beyond the focus of this research.

### **6.2.3. THE NECESSARY ROLE OF THE TEACHER IN ENSURING THE OUTCOMES OF TASK-BASED INTERACTION BETWEEN COMPLETE BEGINNERS OF CFL**

Paper 2 has shown that complete beginners of CFL are able to construct opportunities for learning during tasks, but this does not mean that there is no need for a teacher in the classroom. Conversely, it suggests that the presence of the teacher is necessary to ensure the quality of the constructed knowledge emerging from task-based interaction. This need for the teacher is mainly due to phenomena such as: 1) cases in which learners take incorrect exemplifications or explanations from their peer interlocutors during task performance; 2) learners seldom correcting each other's errors in grammar or pronunciation as these appear during tasks. Two possibilities are suggested for this. First, beginner learners have very limited L2 knowledge, especially in Chinese pronunciation. They may not be certain of the correctness of the productions made by their interlocutors, and therefore they cannot offer correction. Second, they may intentionally avoid the correction of errors appearing in each other's productions out of social affective concerns such as face-losing or potential damage to relationships. Irrespective of which possibility, imagine if these errors were not corrected in a timely manner; they could remain in learners' linguistic systems, becoming a barrier to developing accuracy in using the Chinese language. This is particularly true with Chinese pronunciation in that an incorrect utterance can make a significant difference in meaning.

Obviously, the point here is not to undermine the value of task-based interaction, but rather to better enhance this value for L2 learning by highlighting the importance of the teacher's role in doing so. In other words, focusing on interaction as the key factor to classroom teaching and learning is more than just a matter of providing learners with pair or group work (Antón, 1999). The teacher being the only expert in classroom allows him or her to play a pivotal role in monitoring the outcomes of learner-learner interaction. Implied here is the message that understanding the teacher's performance during teacher-learner interaction is also necessary and critical in light of the efficiency of classroom teaching and learning.

### **6.3. TEACHER PLAYS A CRITICAL ROLE IN PROVIDING LEARNERS WITH OPPORTUNITIES FOR LEARNING DURING TEACHER-FRONTED INTERACTION**

In view of the need for teacher-fronted instruction suggested in Paper 1 and the necessary role of the teacher in consolidating the knowledge constructed during task-based learners' interaction suggested in Paper 2, Paper 3 seeks to examine whether and how the teacher provides learners with opportunities for learning during teacher-fronted interaction. Results from the microgenetic analysis of teacher-learner interaction, together with the empirical data elicited from learner interviews, could be generalised into the following two aspects below:

#### **6.3.1. MEDIATING LEARNERS' PARTICIPATION IN CLASSROOM INTERACTION**

From a sociocultural perspective, teaching is not at all a linear knowledge-transmission from teacher to learner, but rather an assisted activity in which the teacher mediates learners' movement through their ZPD--from what they cannot do individually to what they can do with assistance en route to self-regulated social and mental ability (Gánem-Gutiérrez, 2013). From this, it can be said that the result of this mediation leads to learners' intellectual development. As noted by Haywood and Lidz (2007: 42), mediation is 'what good teachers and parents do when they promote high levels of mental functioning in their children [and learners]'. As such, for learning to occur, the teacher should not place learners in the passive position of being knowledge-recipients, but should instead have learners actively participate in the ongoing dialogic interaction using the target language as a tool, thus opening up their ZPD. Paper 3 identifies four roles that the teacher plays in mediating learner participation by performing a variety of verbal and nonverbal discursive techniques.

##### **1) Using learners as interactional resources**

By inviting other learners to act as interactional resources, the teacher creates a condition that helps them to understand the ongoing communication. This understanding then facilitates learners in better involving themselves in accomplishing the L2 productions with which they may initially have difficulty. This accomplishment may be simply an appropriate use of the target word or mastering a pronunciation, but within the sociocultural perspective, it is an important indicator of the learner's increasing L2 competence within the ZPD, representing learning in progress.

##### **2) Cultivating learners' responsibility for their own learning**

Paper 3 shows that instead of directly providing an answer, the teacher deals with the difficulties that learners encounter during the interaction through techniques such as encouraging learners to find the solution to the given question, inviting learners to evaluate language productions by one another and asking learners to respond to questions that another fails to answer. As such, rather than being a 'possessor of remedies' (Antón, 1999), the teacher develops learners' own responsibility for learning by acting as a facilitator of the interaction. This responsibility, in turn, may create a sense of community in which learners are likely to participate and contribute their expertise to construct the knowledge being discussed. This not only enables the teacher to discover the individual learner's ZPD, but also simultaneously creates a collective ZPD for the whole class, which is beneficial because the combination of the individual ZPD and the collective has been claimed as being desirable for facilitating learning (Guk & Kellogg, 2007).

### 3) Expanding learners' productions

Within the sociocultural paradigm, the driving force of development is instruction, which should be sensitive to the ZPD rather than learners' actual level of development (Ableeva & Lantolf, 2011). That is to say, teaching would not be necessary if it did not trigger learners' intellectual development (Vygotsky, 1987). By pushing learners to clarify or expand what they have produced, the teacher promotes learners' participation in interaction, the result of which stimulates a range of cognitive functions that are building within the ZPD and furthers the learners' progress toward self-regulation of these functions both socially and mentally (Vygotsky, 1987).

### 4) Creating a relaxed learning environment

Given the previously discussed limitations inherent in a foreign language context, the quality of the classroom environment impacts the efficiency of learning. Few would argue that an active and interactive environment can bring about good experiences for learners, thus leading to increasing motivation in the process of learning. Moreover, within this environment, learners are more likely to take risks or initiatives to engage themselves in experiencing their L2 use and making sense of their productions through interaction with the teacher or their peers. From a sociocultural perspective, this engagement is a necessary step for learning. Certainly, the classroom environment is not unaffected by individual teaching styles; it is this that makes it necessary and essential to explore how a teacher can create an environment prompting more engaged and active interaction through which learning may be enhanced.



### **6.3.2. JOINT ENDEAVOURS BY TEACHER AND LEARNERS TO MAKE CLASSROOM INTERACTION EFFECTIVE FOR LEARNING**

As discussed above, the teacher draws on a range of discursive strategies to provide learners with opportunities for learning. However, it cannot be taken for granted that these strategies work for learners in the way the teacher expects. Indeed, Paper 3 has identified some instances in which learners cannot involve themselves in continuing the ongoing communication, even though the teacher has afforded them the opportunity to do so. Analysis of the data from the learners' interviews has attributed the reason for this to individual learner differences regarding individual learning style, educational background, social affective concerns and even learners' personal investments in the learning process.

Note that this is said here neither to criticise learners' poor performance nor complain about their various learning preferences, but rather to emphasise that 1) any discursive strategy or technique used by the teacher should take learners into account; this point has some resonance with the mismatch between teacher and learners regarding task design, as revealed in Paper 1; 2) to make classroom interaction effective and efficient, efforts made only on the part of teacher are inadequate given that the efficacy of interaction is not a system of either-or, but a mutual process by teacher and learner together. Therefore, we cannot afford to ignore the effects of learners on this process. As Thornbury (1996: 287) notes, teacher training programmes and further research 'must also address the larger concern of the learner's personal investment in the language learning process'. Only with this joint endeavour by teacher and learner can a more engaged and dynamic classroom interaction be created to better serve L2 learning.

### **6.4. TEACHER SHOULD IMPROVE THE USE OF LANGUAGE IN SUCH A WAY TO MAKE CLASSROOM INTERACTION FACILITATIVE FOR L2 LEARNING**

Considering the findings reported in Papers 1-3, we can say that the teacher has a critical role to play in the classroom interaction process. Paper 4 takes its departure from the following points: 1) language is the essential tool that the teacher relies on to orchestrate classroom interaction; 2) the teacher's reflection on his or her own classroom practices is seen as a necessary and effective tool for improving teaching and learning. Given these points, it is assumed that self-reflective enquiry on the quality of teacher language use helps to raise the teacher's awareness and improve language use in a way that makes classroom interaction more facilitative for learning.

Drawing upon the principles of exploratory practice, sociocultural analysis on teacher-learner interaction identifies a variety of features of teacher language use

which are summarised into the following two aspects in relation to their effects on language learning:

#### **6.4.1. CONSTRUCTION: TEACHER LANGUAGE USE PROMOTES OPPORTUNITIES FOR LEARNING**

Sociocultural analysis of the data shows that opportunities for learning are constructed when teacher language use has the effects of the three aspects below:

##### **1) Shaping learner contributions**

Within the sociocultural perspective of learning, the overall process entails learners using language as a tool to participate in the meaning-making process; in this sense, the teacher as an orchestrator of classroom interaction must provide opportunities for this participation. One way to do so is to shape learner contributions. By using various communicative moves such as elaborative questions, clarification requests, translation, emphasis, recasts and confirmation checks, the teacher opens up a space for learners to stretch their L2 skills through interaction with him or her. This stretch is likely to trigger learners' cognitive functions to process L2 knowledge and make more sense of their productions, the result of which leads to a performance at a higher level than may have been achieved without this opportunity. Said another way, shaping learner contributions enables the teacher to see what learners can do and what they cannot, primarily to discover learners' ZPD, and this in turn promotes cognitive development. Borrowing support from Vygotsky's view that teaching should be sensitive to ZPD, it can be said that the teacher using language to shape learner contributions is beneficial for language learning.

##### **2) Providing interactional space**

In the rapid flow of classroom interaction, it is quite common for teachers to fill in the pauses that occur when learners are rehearsing or reassessing their L2 productions. There are some good arguments for doing so, but this can tend to make the classroom interaction teacher-dominated, leaving little space for learner participation (Larsen-Freeman, 1986). Conversely, when teacher language use allows this pause or silence, the teacher is effectively giving time for planning, sending a request for clarification and encouraging learners' contributions, which may result in a back-and-forth profile of interaction and thus create an interactional space wherein learners may participate in the meaning-making process by activating some cognitive functions that are in the process of development within the ZPD. As such, providing interactional space for learner participation effectively affords a context for learners' intellectual development.

##### **3) Involving learners in finding the solution to a problem**

As the only expert in the classroom, the teacher has the responsibility of remedying linguistic problems encountered by learners during the interaction. However, the ways in which teacher does so matters a great deal for learning, especially when learning is viewed as a social activity that entails learners' participation in making sense of their productions through talk. Under this view, the teacher is no longer a possessor of remedies but a mediator of knowledge-construction and problem-solving (Antón, 1999). In other words, to promote learning, teacher language use must afford learners the chance to construct their linguistic knowledge needed for problem-solving. Through this involvement, learners are put in the context of monitoring and expanding their own and each other's contributions, and ultimately accomplishing their productions in a target-like manner. This accomplishment arises as a consequence of learners' increasing L2 competence within the ZPD. In this sense, it can be claimed that having learners involved in the process of problem-solving is conducive to L2 learning (Walsh, 2002)

In short, learning is largely promoted when teacher language use provides more opportunities for learners to participate in the meaning-making interactional process. However, some features of teacher language use work the opposite way.

#### **6.4.2. OBSTRUCTION: TEACHER LANGUAGE USE RESTRICTS OPPORTUNITIES FOR LEARNING**

Findings in Paper 4 identify the two features of teacher language use that inhibit potential opportunities for learning, each of which is presented below:

##### **1) Leaving limited space for learners to reflect on their L2 use**

Viewed from a sociocultural perspective, language not only articulates our thoughts but also shapes and reshapes them. It is through language in interaction that we evaluate new knowledge, obtain new skills and develop deeper understanding or new insight. In this sense, when the teacher's language use restricts learners to being passive recipients, it also restricts opportunities to 'see the images of his pupils' minds projected on the screen of their language' (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988: 59). Without this projection, no matter how understandable the teacher's instruction is, it is unclear whether learners have assimilated the knowledge being discussed or whether they are able to use it appropriately. In other words, when teacher language use does not have learners participating and reflecting on the L2 knowledge being discussed during interaction, it fails to create opportunities for intellectual development since no mental participation from learners is required or activated.

##### **2) Interrupting learners' productions during the interaction**

Admittedly, acknowledgement from the teacher is valuable in classroom processes. This is particularly the case with complete beginners of CFL, as Chinese is one of

the more difficult languages for foreigners to learn and the disadvantages in a foreign language context are unfavourable for developing learners' L2 proficiency in a short time. As such, the teacher praising what learners have produced in L2 is favourable for learners' confidence or motivation in their learning. However, this does not mean that the more acknowledgements the teacher gives, the better learning is enhanced. Indeed, too much use of acknowledgement may occupy space that could be used for learner participation or interrupt the coherence of learners' productions, a problem that can also be a result of the use of teacher echo during the interaction. Note here the intention is not to deny the value of acknowledgement tokens or teacher echo, but rather to highlight the point that when this use of teacher language does not activate any mental participation in problem-solving activities, excessive use of it can become a habit and serve as an interruption, inhibiting learners in making creative use of their L2 or constructing their productions in a coherent way.

Taking all of this together, Paper 4 has shown multiple features of teacher language use and their effects on opportunities for learning. Although it is not clear whether these features lead to learning or not, this self-reflective enquiry undoubtedly produces immediate pay-offs for the teacher, at least in terms of her heightened awareness of language use, allowing her to run her class in a way that creates a more engaged and active classroom interaction that is likely to promote learning.



## CHAPTER 7. CONTRIBUTIONS AND LIMITATIONS

This Ph.D. research has investigated classroom interaction and how it relates to classroom teaching and learning in the context of complete beginners of Chinese as a foreign language. It makes some contributions to our theoretical understandings of knowledge-based L2 classroom research in general and to the teaching and learning of Chinese in particular. From a pedagogical perspective, this research produces greater insights for Chinese language teachers, with a special emphasis on those with lower proficiency learners, in terms of how to promote learners' participation in classroom interaction and how to effectively use their language in a way that makes interaction likely to enhance learning. Also, it raises significant issues for teacher education programmes and future research agendas. These contributions are summarised below:

### 1). Viewing L2 classroom teaching from both an external and internal perspective

In accordance with Ellis (1999), when adopting an external view of teaching, the classroom process is seen as the implementation of specific teaching methodologies, materials or curricula. However, a growing body of evidence has noted that teaching is more than just a matter of method or techniques (Chaudron, 2001), as what works in one context may not be feasible in another. This highlights the need for an internal perspective that views teaching as the provision of opportunities for learning through the interaction that occurs in the classroom. Investigation on how interaction relates to language learning enables us to have a deeper understanding of the classroom learning process, which in turn feeds the development of classroom teaching practices. Note that the intention is not to compare the advantages and disadvantages of the two perspectives, but rather to highlight the point that the classroom process should be interpreted from both perspectives if we seek to fully grasp how learning takes place and why, as well as how teaching can be made more effective.

### 2). Understanding the L2 classroom learning as a social activity

Within the sociocultural perspective, learning has its origins in social activities in which knowledge is first constructed by participants via interaction before it is internalised and contributes to each individual's own ability. Seen from this perspective, the classroom itself is a social context from which learning emerges due to the interaction between teacher and learners as well as among learners themselves. In this sense, interaction is central to the classroom process. It can be said that any effort to improve classroom teaching and learning should look at

interaction. Understanding L2 classroom learning as a social activity enables us to gain a more complete picture of how learning takes place, on the basis of which we can better inform classroom teaching practices.

### 3). Producing pedagogical implications for the Chinese as a foreign language classroom

Although this research does not directly address CFL classroom teaching, the implication it has for teaching practices is profound. Firstly, the positive relationship identified between task-based learners' interaction and learning highlights the value of incorporating task-based activities into Chinese language classes, especially with lower proficiency learners. This, however, does not mean that teaching need only offer the provision of this pair/group work. Conversely, the teacher is very much needed to ensure the outcomes of task-based learners' interaction due to the occurrence of incorrect solutions to some linguistic problems or uncorrected errors in learners' productions. Also, the teacher plays a pivotal role in determining interactional structures and the resulting learning opportunities.

### 4). Prioritising classroom interaction as an agenda of teacher education programmes

Teacher education programmes have mainly focused on teaching methods and subject-related knowledge for pre-service or in-service teachers (Walsh, 2011). The effects that these programmes have on classroom processes, however, are limited, as the context in which teaching takes place impacts what is feasible and desirable (Nunan, 1995). This is to say that one's teaching method must be sensitive to the context. This is further evidenced by Paper 1 included in this Ph.D. research. Given the significance of teacher language use, interaction and learning, understanding how learning takes place in classroom interaction and how teacher language use makes classroom interaction facilitative for L2 learning seems more profitable for classroom teaching and learning. As such, teacher education programmes should prioritise classroom interaction as their agenda by helping teachers develop a better understanding of classroom interaction and how they can create an environment that stimulates more engaged and active interactions in order to promote learning.

### 5). Shedding light on new prospects for future research

This Ph.D. research suggests several areas for more research in the future. Perhaps the most important is the need to design pre- and post-tests for students in order to investigate whether the constructed knowledge from task-based interaction between complete beginners of CFL is incorporated into their lexicons for later use. More research is needed to examine the relationship between some features of teacher language use and L2 learning. Also, although microgenetic analysis of the data shows the instances of learning at a given point of the ongoing interaction, it is not clear whether learners internalised these instances and learned to use them

appropriately at a later occasion. Therefore, a longitudinal study is indispensable for us to fully grasp the relationship between interaction and learning. As argued by Hall (2000), the more long-term investigation is conducted, the more complete our understanding of the processes and outcomes of foreign language learning becomes.

The limitations of this Ph.D. research relate to two aspects: the study's qualitative orientation and the nature of the research design.

### 1) Research method

This Ph.D. research is exploratory and qualitative in orientation, meaning that the findings are necessarily at the level of insight that needs to be substantiated or corroborated by further research. This is particularly true with the method of microgenetic analysis since it mainly documents the ongoing changes appearing in learners' linguistic performance as they emerge from the task-based interaction. However, this research does not provide solid evidence on whether these changes remain in learners' linguistic system in the long term. For this reason, it cannot be claimed that learners are able to generalise their learning in new tasks and new contexts; the same problem also extends to the discursive strategies used by the teacher during teacher-learner interaction, as reported in Papers 3 and 4. Additionally, the method of exploratory practice by observation and self-reflection on the teacher's own classroom practices raises issues of validity and reliability, although alternative criteria has been proposed to judge research conducted in this direction.

### 2) The nature of research design

As a practitioner of research, the double role of being both teacher and researcher in this Ph.D. research may be problematic. In view of the observer's paradox, both learners and teacher might have performed differently if there was no recording, or if the teacher was not also acting as a researcher. Moreover, as a researcher, I might have already known the theoretical rationale concerning how to make teaching more effective. Simultaneously, as a teacher, I may have done so in a purposefully productive way during the recording. Although I have tried my best to be objective in my performance during classroom interaction, it is still difficult to verify that the teaching has been presented in this way. Additionally, as this study was conducted in the teacher's particular instructional context, it may be limited in terms of generalising the findings of this research to a new context.

The above limitations, however, are not an end, but a driving force for me to conduct more research in a related direction in order to develop a deeper and more complete understanding of classroom teaching and learning with Chinese as a foreign language.



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## SUMMARY

Interaction has long been considered as critical to classroom teaching and learning. This Ph.D. study has provided us with a better understanding of what exactly goes on in the classroom and how it relates to learning by focusing on the interaction in a classroom for complete beginners of Chinese as a foreign language (CFL). Framed by the sociocultural perspective of learning, it has shown that complete beginners of CFL benefit from task-based interaction. Nevertheless, the teacher still has a pivotal role to play in monitoring the outcomes of the learners' interaction and in orienting classroom interaction in which learners have active participation. It highlights the significance of teachers to raise awareness of their language use in a way that makes classroom interaction a rich environment for learning. This study has produced greater insight for Chinese teachers in relation to how to implement task-based activity effectively and how to make teaching efficient. Additionally, it has also yielded pointers for Chinese teacher education by prioritizing interaction, teacher language use, and learning as an agenda.